

Robert K. Johnston. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006. 352 pages. \$17.33.

Robert Johnston's *Reel Spirituality* encourages Christians to embrace film as a theological conversation partner. The second edition has less of an apologetic tone than the first since "the question today for most Christians is not *whether* the church should engage Hollywood, but *how* the engagement should be done" (14). Even so, much of the book focuses on the *why* as it attempts (likely successfully!) to convince the church to embrace a kind of "ethical patience" as it allows films to stand on their own merit before judging them; judgment here is referred to as "Judeo-Christian heavy-handedness" (263). Chapter four explores six theological reasons why Christians should enter into dialogue with film in this way.

Even though the subtext of the book is the author's stance as a church person telling fellow church people *why* they should embrace the relationship between "real" and "reel," the book helpfully moves toward outlining *how* the church might move from the approaches that "begin theologically and judge movies from a predetermined norm [avoidance and caution] to those critical perspectives that first view a movie on its own terms [dialogue, appropriation and divine encounter]" (65). Three chapters in particular give readers ample tools for putting faith and film into conversation. The first is chapter 8 ("Becoming a Film Critic"). In addition to exploring the narrative shape of film, Johnston summarizes four aspects of film criticism: genre criticism, auteur criticism, thematic criticism, and cultural criticism. Johnston affirms the church's longstanding experience with a similar multi-level method of interpretation. Since the church has had far less experience with incorporating into its analysis the effects that music and image have on one's experience, Johnston adds such elements to this second edition. This chapter is valuable not only for Christian moviegoers as they seek to assess movies on their own terms, but indirectly for preachers and worship leaders as they seek to craft and assess the experience of worshippers.

In this second edition, Johnston also responds to the first edition's critics with a full chapter on "Responding to Film Ethically" (ch. 9). The critics are right that a conversation about movies that "invite, demand even, our response" (23) might very well be the "ticket" to help Christian moviegoers "enter into theological conversation with film." While this chapter has potential to move to the *how*, and Johnston is to be commended on the addition, it primarily adopts an apologetic tone. The brief section on "developing skills for moral discourse" and the helpful examples at the end of the chapter are the exceptions.

Johnston postpones "Responding to Movies Theologically" (ch. 10) until the end since, according to the author, the "penultimate" [film] "demands our initial attention" (239). In this chapter, Johnston fully embraces the growing trend "to see the human and aesthetic dimensions of film, that is, to seek an encounter with cinema" (242). In so doing, one might have an encounter with the divine. It is here that the "'real' and the 'reel' come together in the experience of the viewer" (267). Johnston places himself squarely in the divine encounter category on his continuum.

In addition to the more skills-oriented substance in the "Responding to Film Ethically" chapter, another helpful addition to the book would be a clarification of the balance between leaving theological convictions aside in order to assess/experience a film on its own terms and the author's attempt to acknowledge at various points that viewers' social situations or competencies influence their experience of a movie" (213) just as "movies reflect the social and personal histories of their makers" (196). While the author states explicitly that "we do not leave

our experiences and reflections at the door” (228) and that “we cannot escape responding to film from our own perspective, our own center of power and meaning” (240), he still insists that viewers must, for a time (how long?), set aside their theological convictions.

Perhaps the most beneficial element of this book for church leaders, teachers, and all Christian moviegoers, in fact, is the impressive engagement with the exploding number of resources available on theology and film and the broad range of films engaged explicitly and deeply. The final chapter provides an “exercise in dialogue” that incorporates the wisdom of the previous chapters and is the book’s finest section.

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